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Case study: Mayoral Responsibility in Riot Aftermath

Resulting from oppressing grievances and trigger events, riots have occurred throughout the United States in various forms. Integral to the study of riots in various cities is the study of a riot's aftermath. How elites and politicians respond to riots defines not only personal values, but also demonstrates the values, morality, and perceptions prevalent locally and nationally. Here, I examine the responses of three mayors after three separate riots in Chicago and New York City and what resulted from these responses.

In reading *Race, Space, and Riots* by Janet Abu-Lughod, one is introduced to the social and cultural climate of 1968 Chicago. Defined by social and institutional racism determining spacial relations of Chicago residents, Chicago clearly was a breeding place for residential grievances. White privilege was defined and advanced as struggles for space, housing, jobs, and access to equitable public services defined the oppression of black residents. In 1968, these grievances were ignited to outrage upon the news of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Upon hours of the news, protests began to break out in high schools on the South Side. Over the next few days protests amounted to property destruction, "looting," and eventually arson, or what sociologists would define as a riot.

After the National Guard eventually quelled the riots, Mayor Daley thought it appropriate to again ignite outrage with a series of inflammatory, and threatening remarks. He publicly expressed his irritation that the superintendent of police had not followed his direction to "shoot to kill arsonists and maim and detain looters" (Abu-Lughod 101). His incendiary remarks suggested black lives were expendable when perpetuating petty crime in the midst of a riot. His callous remarks were met with disdain, anger, and backlash, forcing Daley to rebuke his statement. However, the damage his inhumanely harsh commentary had done was unretractable. His remarks solidified blacks as oppressed in Chicago.

Forced to address riot-causing grievances, mayors like Daley are forced to analyze and critique their cities on what triggers and grievances plagued their city into violence. In a more modern example given in class, Mayor de Blasio of New York City was pressured to address the issue of police brutality after the #BlackLivesMatter movement spread national outrage over police brutality. However, in personally identifying with the fear of police brutality by

suggesting his sons of mixed race were at higher risk for police mistreatment than white boys, he effectively identified the city's police officers as consistent perpetrators of racism. When identifying racism, one must identify a racist. In terms of police brutality against minorities, by acknowledging minority struggles with racial profiling, racial slurs, and even brutal violence, one is defining police as racist in their policing practices. Mayoral response here caused an isolation of the entire police department from de Blasio, while crediting minorities with their experiences with racist police tactics. In contrast to Mayor Daley isolating himself from his city's black community, Mayor de Blasio effectively isolated himself from the NYPD community while claiming solidarity with racial minorities angered by police brutality.

I would like to propose there is another way in which Mayors respond to the aftermath of rioting; silence. In researching the Stonewall riots of New York City in 1969, I found Mayor Ed Koch purposefully remained silent on the gay community's grievances towards police raids on gay bars. Interestingly, Mayor Koch was rumored to be gay, however, he failed to publicize his sexuality because it would have isolated him from potential voters (American Experience). He also remained silent on the Stonewall riots for the same reason. He recalls his decision to remain silent at the time was due to a fear of mixed response. He said, *"In the Village the reaction would have been very positive. I don't know what the reaction would have been elsewhere. I suspect half the population would have been positive and the other half not."* In other words, he failed to address gay oppression at the time of the riots in fear of mixed reactions, however, by doing so, he angered the gay community even more. The gay rights movement knew of Mayor Koch's rumored homosexuality, and therefore felt betrayed by his silence on the Stonewall riots.

In conclusion, in addressing riot-inducing grievances such as racial and sexual oppression, political elites make crucial choices in how to respond. I would argue that regardless of their response tactics, however, that their choices always leave a community alienated. Daley's response to the Chicago 1968 riots left blacks alienated and at risk of police brutality, Mayor de Blasio left the NYPD alienated and at risk of stigma and vigilante retribution, and Mayor Koch's intentional silence left the gay community frustrated, closeted, and at risk of discrimination.

Works Cited

Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.

"American Experience: TV's Most-watched History Series." *PBS*. PBS, n.d. Web. 21 Nov. 2015.